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Creating a Strong Family Commitment: The Family Comes First

By John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development

In our recent research on strong families in Australia, we heard story after story of the incredible staying power that these family members demonstrate toward each other. "What are the qualities that make you a strong family?" we would ask. People responding often would look down in deep thought, rub their hands as the search continued for the precise answer, and then finally throw up their hands in dismay: "We're... just... there for each other!" would fly out on a wave of emotion.

Words don't really describe this phenomenon very well, but the emotions attached to the words convey the message quite clearly. Strong families are committed to each other above all else. The family comes first.

Let me qualify that a bit. In some families who speak in traditionally religious terms, God is first. The life of the family is dedicated to God and the family members' connection is to the greater good in the world. But it becomes very clear when continuing the discussions with these families that God and family are intimately linked in their minds, and they express a love for God by loving their families.

Let's listen to the family members themselves:

"My wife bought me an expensive wedding ring for our first anniversary. This symbolized to me that she thought we were going to be together for a long time."

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"We give each other the freedom and encouragement to pursue individual goals. Yet either of us would cut out activities or goals that threaten our existence as a couple. She has a wonderful job that she loves, but she wouldn't transfer to another city if I couldn't go happily, and vice versa."

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"Divorce is not an option for us. We do fight; sometimes we don't sleep in the same bed. There's nothing wrong with sleeping apart. You find out how cold your bed can be without your partner."

"My husband and I decided that family is very important to us. Our relationship and our relationship with our children will outlast jobs and cars and houses. We have a goal of making our family healthy and loving; we work at it."

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"What we have as a family is a treasure."

Besides valuing the family as a unit, strong families do not lose sight of the value of each individual family member, for "Each person forms a part of the family and each part is precious."

Commitment includes sexual fidelity. Some of the couples in our research recalled a crisis earlier in the relationship when an extramarital affair had come to light. Some marriages end at this point. For other marriages this can signal a new beginning in which the couple does some serious talking and creates a sound foundation for continuing on together.

Commitment describes a special kind of love we have for each other — a love that is steady and sure and is not subject to mood swings, the passage of the years or hard times. Sometimes we wander through cemeteries reading the gravestones. Rather than being unremittingly sad places, we find that cemeteries can be very uplifting places where we can find wonderful glimpses into the magnificent human spirit and the deep bonds we have for each other. On one very old stone we found these words:

Time flies. Flowers die. New days. New ways. Love stays.

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Index: Family Life Relationships Issued September 2000

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